

# MAMMUT

ISSUE #2 · SPRING 2009 LIVING WITH THE CITY





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Welcome to the second issue of Mammut. Through the print edition and freely available PDF version, we have begun to develop an audience for a journal that investigates all forms of creative production that have a relationship with nature, landscape and environmentalism. Thanks for reading Mammut #2 and be sure to check [mammutmagazine.org](http://mammutmagazine.org) for updates and future issues.

For the theme section of this issue—Living with the City—we've sought content that focuses on the nature of urban living. As the world's population is increasingly concentrated in urban centers, how we choose to interact, develop and live in these cities will only become more important. With a variety of perspectives, we hope to offer new ideas, directions and ways of understanding urban life.

—Matthias Merkel Hess and Roman Jaster

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## *Erring on the Side of Conversation: An interview with Ari Kletzky of Islands of LA*

BY MATTHIAS MERKEL HESS

Started in 2007, *Islands of LA* is an ongoing project that investigates traffic islands and how to make use of them in a new way.<sup>1</sup> The project has taken the form of public gatherings, events and numerous signs around Los Angeles declaring islands part of the “Islands of LA National Park” and others urging “Do art any time.” ¶ For this interview, I picked up founder Ari Kletzky in Highland Park—he was prepared with folding chairs and a small metal folding table. After quick stops for take-out coffee and Mexican food, we made our way to a spacious, park-like traffic island in Hermon, a small district of Los Angeles on the east side of the 110 Freeway.<sup>2</sup> This island, on the south side of the intersection of Avenue 60 and Monterey Road, is about a third of an acre and dotted with a gridded pattern of irrigation sprinklers, a few trees and an ornate, Mission-style sign that declares “Hermon.” ¶ We set up our table and chairs, ate lunch and had a wide-ranging discussion on Islands of LA, community, art and the strange shrimp concoction I’d ordered.<sup>3</sup> Kletzky quickly pointed out that islands are some of the only free public spaces that can be gathering points after dusk—parks are closed, school grounds are locked and bars or other venues generally have some sort of price to entry such as buying a drink. ¶ This type of conversation and the ones Kletzky envisions taking place at all times of the day, I came to realize, is the project. Mostly he’d like to create conversations, person-to-person interactions, and projects that grow and evolve. To that point, he prefers interviews that take place on—or at least include a visit to—a traffic island. I was more than happy to oblige his request and what follows is a reconstruction of the conversation, which I tried to write down as it went along.<sup>4</sup>

**Matthias Merkel Hess:** How did you become interested in traffic islands?

**Ari Kletzky:** I first started looking at them four or five years ago. I think poetically, I can say I was stuck in traffic—longing for a vacation—and I looked over and said, ‘That’s a perfect place to take a vacation.’ But I kind of like that I don’t exactly remember what generated the idea.

**MMH:** How do you feel about the response to the project, which has been quite positive.

**AK:** I’ve been very fortunate, the project has been very fortunate. It’s just something I had to do. Instead of going to the movies, I spend my time and money on this. I’ve traveled abroad and maybe this is a way of traveling locally...[*We discuss the idea of erring and its Latin root, which means ‘wandering’ or ‘straying.’*]<sup>5</sup>...wandering doesn’t have to be a mistake.

**MMH:** Do you know how many traffic islands there are in LA?

**AK:** How many do you think there are?

**MMH:** I don’t know, thousands. It seems like there a lot.

**AK:** There are fewer with crosswalks to them. But there’s a lot of these pockets that do exist.

[*Finishing lunch, we take a walk, and stop to look at the Hermon sign.*]

**MMH:** Is this the style that the City of LA uses for all these signs?

**AK:** The signs all vary. I’m sure there’s a process where they get a local artist to submit a design. What do you think of this space?





**MMH:** Well, it's like a park. There's a ton of sprinkler heads. It seems like this could be a perfect place for a block party, or a park for the nearby residents.

**AK:** Yeah, sometimes it's a question of how we see what's right in front of us. Mexico and Venezuela are examples of where land is seen in a different light. In those countries, traffic islands are definitely used. In Venezuela, they are almost like another district, they are used so much for shops or gathering places. I think there is so much resourcefulness to those cultures, and a different view of social space.

I'm really interested in the social script—what we are socialized to do. There are other ways of interacting. What do you get when you investigate these and explore these ideas?

**MMH:** Your project has taken the form of an ongoing discussion, activities and signs. But it very well could have been one event that is presented in say, a multi-channel video piece.

**AK:** The project has been very horizontal—I didn't do all these on the same island or try to do one big event.

I'm interested in space versus place and asking 'What is community?' Is it this thing that's a static entity or this thing that's full of conflict? I'm really interested in agonism, a theory that conflict is central to democracy.<sup>6</sup> Is all conflict bad? Or how you deal with conflict becomes part of the political process.

Some people have said, 'Well, you don't live in this neighborhood. Why are you doing a project here?' Well, do I have to live in a neighborhood to make use of its traffic islands? In considering a public space, all these questions and conflicts come up.

*[The conversation turns to using the islands, a process that Kletzky has been careful to keep within current laws. The project points directly to the potential of the islands as gathering places, or whatever people decide they want them to be.]*

**AK:** If we have increased rights in these places, how do we use them? Does ethics become more important than aesthetics? What should I be allowed to do in these places?

**MMH:** *[I ask about the Islands of LA signs, some of which lay out possibilities for how to use the islands. Kletzky's latest sign is pretty great.]*<sup>7</sup>

**AK:** I haven't been putting up signs in a while. But some of them are still up. They are kind of a sign of the project, an invitation to the public. But I think there are other perspectives which are interesting—the project has an element of irony and absurdity and if you don't see that, it might be harder to understand what we are doing.

How did you hear about the project?

**MMH:** Well, I saw the LA Times article<sup>8</sup> and a few months later, I saw a sign on a small traffic island in my neighborhood—near National and Sepulveda. It's a small island, I can't really imagine what you could do there, or at least I don't have any ideas right now.

**AK:** A tactic in art has always been to make it strange. I think it's a good thing for dialogue, it's like "No way!" There's an absurdity to that. But there are islands that are large enough where you could really do a lot. And there are a





Preparing for an island activity in Glassell Park. There have been more than 40 events on traffic islands.

ton of interesting islands you can really only visit from the car or across the street. It's like bird watching, only it's urban artifact watching.

I like to ask how we can play in a city. We know how Coca-Cola and NBC would move in and market a product. What are other ways? How do you approach this from a culturally creative perspective?

**MMH:** Well, your project seems like one way.

**AK:** Hopefully it's a way to explore these ideas.

*Kletzky goes on to recount a story of printing signs at the Glassell Park Office Depot and talking to an employee about an event near the store. It's obvious that he considers that conversation to be just another piece of the Island of LA project, because, well, we talk about that Office Depot worker for a bit without even discussing the related project event.*

*We end our visit to the Hermon island and then drive to the intersection of Figueroa Street and York Boulevard where we observe—from the car—the traffic island on the southeast corner. The island is used as a bus stop and has a war memorial maintained by a local Kiwanis club. Kletzky points out that in addition to signs marking neighborhoods or districts of town, traffic islands are often used for war memorials.*

*Then it's another quick drive up Figueroa to La Prada Street. A short, dead-end residential street up a hill, it's nonetheless wide and has five long traffic islands. Discussing how it could be used, Kletzky asks about my ideas for these islands. My suggestions are sort of dumb—a bike race or block party—but he's nonetheless engaged and interested. We stop to investigate concrete tiles that contain impressions of 1980s-era LA Times front pages and realize we've definitely "erred" onto something strange and unusual here. We discuss how the islands on this street came to be—they are pretty grand for the modest homes lining the street. Not coming to any conclusions*



See Footnote #7 for the complete text of Kletzky's most recent sign.



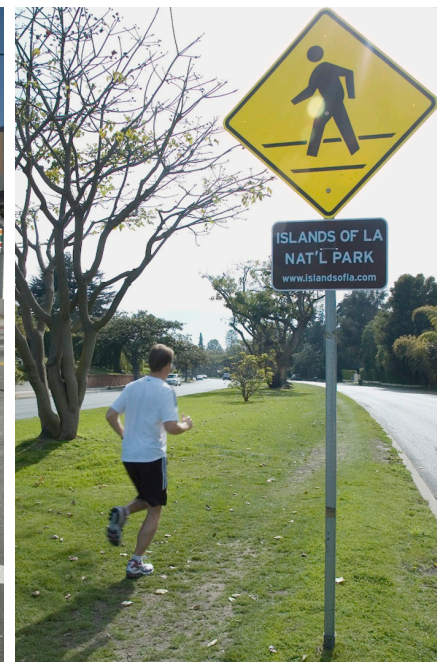
*but with lots of possibilities, I drive Kletzky back to his house where he shows me his latest temporary signs for Islands of LA events, this time in the form of sandwich boards. Concluding our two-hour visit, I head back across town with fresh ideas of how to think, operate and interact with Los Angeles.*

Matt Merkel Hess is co-editor of Mammut Magazine.



The Islands of LA seal. The symbols and words represent some of the major problems and curiosities when considering the use and availability of traffic islands to foster an interchange of views and ideas.

- 1 From <http://islandsofla.org/about.html>: "Islands of LA was conceived of as an art project that utilizes the marginalized yet highly visible public spaces of traffic islands. Islands of LA views the traffic islands as everyday spaces and venues with a complex history and environment. The project explores the dynamics of these spaces through various ways including experimenting with the use of them. The exploration and usage of these spaces engages with questions about public land use and other topics specific to traffic islands and the particular place of a given island. The project began on 9/16/07 and was conceived of by artist Ari Kletzky."
- 2 Established in 1903, Hermon became part of Los Angeles in 1912 but has retained its own identity. It is a community of about 3,000 people, is mostly residential, and has a dog park. For more, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hermon,\\_Los\\_Angeles,\\_California](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hermon,_Los_Angeles,_California)
- 3 I had a Torta de Camaron but it was essentially two shrimp burgers in a red sauce with grilled, sliced nopales. I should have had the hard-shell tacos that Kletzky ordered.
- 4 Shortly before the interview, I realized that my iRiver 800-series Mp3 recorder no longer works with the latest Mac upgrade, OS 10.5.6. Plugging in the 2004-era device resulted in kernal panic and the dreaded "gray screen of death." Thus, this interview is recounted from the notes I could take on the fly (Kletzky, thankfully, didn't slow down for my penmanship.)
- 5 Kletzky said a lot of good stuff here, but I can only refer you to Wikipedia for this: "The word error has different meanings and usages relative to how it is conceptually applied. The concrete meaning of the Latin word error means "wandering" or "straying." To the contrary of an illusion, an error or a mistake can sometimes be dispelled through knowledge (knowing that one is looking at a mirage and not at real water doesn't make the mirage disappear)." from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Error>.
- 6 In yet another wikipedia quote, I'll refer you to <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agonism> to read more such as this: "Agonism is a political theory which emphasizes the potentially positive aspects of certain (but not all) forms of political conflict. It accepts a permanent place for such conflict, but seeks to show how we might accept and channel this positively. For this reason, agonists are especially concerned to intervene in debates about democracy."
- 7 Designed as a temporary sandwich board alerting passersby to events, it says "NOTICE: Although this is an open question in the law, constitutional doctrine suggests that the first amendment and California Constitution guarantee our right to hold discussions and other assemblies on pedestrian-accessible traffic islands, provided these activities do not impede pedestrians or interfere with other substantial government interests, such as traffic safety. "(P)eople have been engaging in (expressive) activity on median strips [traffic islands] for as long as median strips have been in existence. Newspaper criers, local civic fundraisers, members of political campaigns, religious groups, and people with a message have often chosen median strips, with their ready access to the bustle of undifferentiated humanity, as their preferred launching point for expressive conduct." Warren v. Fairfax County, 196, F.3D 186, 191-192, 197 (4th Cir. 1999) (EN BANC)"
- 8 The article is "Against the Flow" by Lynell George in the Los Angeles Times on 5/11/08. For more press coverage, visit <http://islandsofla.org/press.html>.





Paintings

BY MAYA BRYM



(above) *Homing*, 52" x 36", oil and acrylic on canvas, 2006

(right) *Bramble*, 60" x 54", oil and acrylic on canvas, 2008













As an artist, I am drawn to culturally familiar images—like the bird, window and flower—and the enduring, malleable, and ultimately elusive meanings they generate. My paintings create a space between naturalism and metaphor: some works interweave contrasting modes of representation, while others arrive at a form of description that hovers between object and symbol. Each work evolves as the transformative process of painting merges memory and desire within a larger cultural and historical context.

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Maya Brym currently lives and works in New York City. For more information on her work and bio, visit [mayabrym.com](http://mayabrym.com). In addition to her painting practice, she contributes to the Time Out New York art blog.

*Hawk and Rope*, 60" x 72", oil on canvas, 2009



The physical materials that go into making art are often only useful during the duration of an exhibition or performance. Storage of these materials, no longer useful in their raw state and highly specialized to the project they were acquired for, is limited and expensive. The power demands in creating and presenting art are more complicated than those at home or in the office and true alternatives to specialized tools and lighting are either expensive or technologically lacking. All of these issues force artists and arts organizations to be extremely inventive and resourceful when funding projects whose success is defined by messages and ideas, not financial gain.

There are thousands of products that facilitate building homes sustainably. But houses are built to last; *A Doll's House* is not. Parts might be in good shape and useful for the future, but finding a space to store what is left when the show is over often proves overly expensive. And if you are going to throw things away anyway, you aren't going to buy the more expensive green material. We still think of many objects as "disposable," when they are really only moved out of our sight. Yet, while our constant creation puts the arts at odds with the wider sustainability movement, it also provides us repeated opportunities to remake the way we make things.

I started my professional life in architecture, where sustainability was almost always a consideration and, at times, the central motivation for design choices. The arts are not so clear-cut. When I began working in theatrical and installation design, I had not fully thought about how to integrate those ideas into projects that were temporary and conceptually not about sustainability. I asked, "How do you make something that isn't meant to be sustained over time and is not about sustainability itself, sustainable?" This question presents the foundation for The Center for Sustainable Practice in the Arts (CSPA).

The spark for The CSPA came from an installation, based on Aristophanes' play *The Birds*, housed in a shipping container, which was designed to travel with its own solar power for the practical reason of touring without worrying about where to plug it in. This project led to creation of the Sustainable Theatre course at the California Institute of the Arts. As this course was being developed, I received a grant from the Center Theatre Group in Los Angeles to work with them on sustainability issues, based on a proposal to found a conference on greening theatre practice. The CSPA provides a network of resources to arts organizations, enabling them to be ecologically and economically sustainable while maintaining artistic innovation. We provide artists with the necessary tools to increase resourcefulness in lean times. We offer infrastructure, information and education to analyze the impact of materials and processes that artists use. We establish best practices and guidelines so that artists can identify how they have improved their resourcefulness. We bring artists together with the people who can help them accomplish these goals, and we will promote the resulting work.

We accomplish these goals through a number of strategic programs, striving to make change easy. Our website, [sustainablepractice.org](http://sustainablepractice.org), offers a vast repository of information about current projects, a social network for artists and interested parties to connect directly, and a community "wiki" database of projects and resources. We have an annual convergence— this year in partnership with the Earth Matters on Stage symposium at the University of Oregon. At CalArts we are developing a curriculum to teach the next generation of artists about sustainability. We are partnered with Texas Performance Lab in Austin, Texas to create a model on building a sustainable organization from the ground up. And we are working with environmental



and civic leaders in southern California to construct a physical network for material re-use.

We are a young organization—just one year old as I write this. But these programs and these goals have generated much excitement. I feel that this is because these issues aren't simply of practical importance, but about insuring artistic integrity and the artist's freedom to create. There is no future for the artist without taking ecological impact and economic viability into consideration. We are trying to answer "Where are we?" and we've too long avoided the fact that we're completely dependent on our immediate ecology and the economic limitations and possibilities that go along with being responsible in this place. The CSPA supports artists in considering their resources and their surroundings and to remain oriented towards the future and life. Ultimately, The CSPA supports artists that support life.

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Ian Garrett is the executive director of The Center for Sustainable Practice in the Arts (CSPA). He is currently collaborating with the Los Angeles Stage Alliance, the Green Theater Initiative, Arcola Theater and others to work towards sustainability in the arts, ecological and otherwise. He also teaches Sustainable Theater and Management Technology courses at the California Institute of the Arts.

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For more information visit [sustainablepractice.org](http://sustainablepractice.org).







## Capturing the Circulation of Material: Teaching Nature in the City

BY NICHOLAS BAUCH

At the core of geographical research lies the question of how the earth's surface is constituted by the circulation of material, and how that circulation is captured, shaped, known, and aestheticized in different ways by different human groups. Circulation is one of the traditional metaphors of ecology, often conjuring images of the hydrologic cycle, the food chain, blood flow, or climate. In my undergraduate lecture course "Metropolitan Los Angeles: Nature in the City," I work with students to create projects that demonstrate how our use of this metaphor functions no differently in urban environments than it does in what we regard as nature. This forces us to examine the meaning of cities, nature, and our roles in those places.

The FAA's approach pattern routes airplanes arriving from the east into Los Angeles International Airport over the entire San Gabriel and Los Angeles basins in a long, straight, slow descent. On a clear day you can see the layers of mountains to the north and the ocean to the south, and the city mashed between them. With endless rows of houses, tangled freeways, and scattered skyscrapers that fill the field of vision for the last 30 min-

utes of the flight, it is truly one of the marvels of the 21st-century urban world.

Looking at Los Angeles from above screams "city." On the continuum of organized-to-disorganized material, you witness (or at least imagine) an enormity of the organized variety; blocks, bricks, planks, tubs, and tanks all funneled in from mines, forests, and fields whose points of origin span the globe. Organization is not destructive, however, it only hides the previous life of these things. We have literally landscaped hundreds of square miles into a place whose physical well being we no longer consider our moral concern to the degree that we consider the well being of places without such a built environment. After presenting this basic geographical lesson, I ask my students to become artists. I want them to tackle what some have termed this "geographic problematic"<sup>1</sup> by investing the built city with their interpretations of it. We often think of the built environment as something that fits in the realm of reality that belongs to humans.

But what if we consider roads, buildings, parks, all elements of the urban landscape, as constituted by materials from "nature?" How, where, when, and why we make this division is the issue at hand,<sup>2</sup> so in order to think of ways that ideas and materials co-constitute one another, students are assigned the project of creating a tour of metropolitan Los Angeles with a theme of "nature



The intersection of the 405 and 105 freeways in Los Angeles.  
Photograph by Nick Romaniak.



in the city." At least six stops are required in each tour, to be photographed, mapped, and narrated in a personalized Google map.<sup>3</sup> The theme of the tour can be anything of their choosing, as long as it allows them move around the city, to apply research, and to inscribe their thoughts and interpretations—their own narrative—onto the urban landscape so that others can access the maps, follow the tours, and see the city in a different light.

Geography's relationship with art is growing but still tenuous, mostly due to the history of the geographic discipline. Usually considered an earth science or a social science, the earliest foray into art by geographers was the use of literature as a source of environmental perception.<sup>4</sup> Geographers are slowly recognizing that writers' portrayals, to quote D.Z. Meinig, "establish powerful images that affect public attitudes about our landscapes and regions. Our creative writers are our mythmakers...in this way, the connection with art is not supplementary, it is essential...it leads to the very soul of geography."<sup>5</sup>

Instead of imagining their lives as taking place *in* the city, while nature is *out* there, I strive to give students new metaphors for understanding urban space. As the great landscape geographer J.B. Jackson wrote,

The city is like a new natural phenomenon, created not by the tensions of the earth's crust that forces up mountains, or by the erosion that modifies their forms, but by the economic circumstances that thrust skyscrapers into the air.<sup>6</sup>

An important conversation for undergraduates in this course is to interrogate at what point, where exactly, does the city—a place whose processes are commonly thought to be artificial and created by people—stop, and where does what is commonly considered to be the strictly causal world—nature—begin? This is of course a trick question, even when all you are being asked to do is draw a line on a map. The point is that these categories exist in our minds, but cannot be territorialized on a map, let alone on the actual earth's surface. When we begin embodied engagements with the material world, when the airplane finally lands, when we travel around the city to make a tour map, we find that the urban world behaves in unexpected ways. Buildings erode and crumble eventually into soil, much like mountains erode and are carried by the system of concrete channels we call the Los Angeles River, grain by grain to the sea, piling up to make sand on the beaches.<sup>7</sup>

The way we have captured the circulation of material now is but one of countless ways it could be organized, a lesson that students grasp when asked to brainstorm new riparian zones for the Los Angeles River. What would we have to do to make it fit into the moral category of "worth-caring-about?" Plant more trees? Introduce more non-domestic animals? I would argue that it is already worth caring about. It is the surface of the earth; we direct its circulation.

Peter Schjeldahl closes his poem about Los Angeles' Pico Boulevard, "To Pico,"<sup>8</sup> thus:

You are a parade route for entropy  
 You lie across the city like a UFO runway  
 You complacently anticipate a horrible future  
 You are stronger than love, than intelligence, than energy  
 You are a spiritual Fault that has slipped, toppling the better,  
 flimsier constructs of human aspiration  
 You are the secret of the city, the incision that reveals its heart  
 of stone  
 You inscribe on the map a vast, mean smirk (upside down)  
 You attract me; I am yours; I return to you  
 You resonate to a well-known old emptiness  
 You are intimate  
 You whisper  
 You hiss

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Nicholas Bauch is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Geography at UCLA.

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- 1 Sack, Robert D. 1997. *Homo Geographicus: A framework for action, awareness, and moral concern*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- 2 Butler, Judith. 1993. *Bodies That Matter: On the discursive limits of "sex"*. New York: Routledge.
- 3 Selections of these annotated tour maps can be accessed at: [http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/081/geog156-1/final\\_project.htm](http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/081/geog156-1/final_project.htm)
- 4 Tuan, Yi-Fu. 1974. *Topophilia: A study of environmental perception, attitudes, and values*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- 5 Meinig, D. W. 1983. *Geography as an Art*. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 8 (3):314-328.
- 6 Jackson, John B., and Ervin H. Zube. 1970. *Landscapes: Selected writings of J. B. Jackson*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press; page 88.
- 7 McPhee, John A. 1989. *The Control of Nature*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- 8 Schjeldahl, Peter. 1991. *To Pico*. In *The Hydrogen Jukebox: Selected writings of Peter Schjeldahl, 1978-1990*, edited by M. Wilson. Berkeley: University of California Press.

## Shifting Iconographies: The New Lower Ninth Ward

BY SUE BELL YANK

Hurricane Katrina upended centuries-old hierarchies in New Orleans, and rendered spatial boundaries in the city unrecognizable. Artists on multiple fronts took advantage of these liminalities, coalescing into communities with a similarity of purpose: to produce experimental contemporary art in New Orleans linked to a global rather than regional dialogue, and to test the role of art as a force in building community in a post-disaster context. This urgent need to connect artistic activity to a greater social rebuilding process was reflected, distorted, and questioned in the inaugural biennial exhibition Prospect.1 New Orleans from November 2008 through January 2009.

This excerpt from the author's masters thesis in Public Art Studies at the University of Southern California analyzes the site-specific biennial installations in the Lower Ninth Ward, and considers them in relation to the socio-spatial landscape in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

I'm glad I chose to ride a bike around the Lower Ninth Ward rather than the ubiquitous Prospect.1 shuttle with its dark-tinted windows. I had no desire to place any kind of barrier between myself and the nine outdoor installations sited there as part of the inaugural New Orleans Biennial, Prospect.1, nor indeed between my emotions and the weighted post-disaster landscape. Alone with only the sound of my breath and the windy rustling of my surroundings, I found myself irrevocably caught in a loop of cognitive dissonance: riding through what appeared to be the early life stages of a swamp, shaken out of reverie by a lone mailbox or concrete stoop peeking out of the lush overgrowth, dislocated and stripped of meaning.

When I came across biennial artist Leandro Erlich's architectural oddity, a ladder propped at an impossible angle against the brick-lined window frame of an invisible house, I felt my breath steal away even though I had already seen the piece in reproduction. Being confronted with it unexpectedly, in this section of the Lower Ninth Ward and surrounded by similar (real) remnants of what was once a neighborhood, was emotionally eviscerating. Resonating with both the realities of immediate escape from Katrina's devastation and the long-term task of rebuilding while precariously positioned, Erlich's piece elucidated the contradictions of both spatial representation and production in this place. Layered on top of that, the piece's very presence in such a complex landscape challenged me, as a viewer, to interrogate the ability of contemporary art to affect either the conceptual understanding or representation of place.

Such questions have precedents—the nine installations in the loaded Ninth Ward landscape recall the blueprint of the “Places With A Past” Spoleto Festival exhibition of 1991 in Charleston, curated by Mary Jane Jacob. Jacob envisioned a project-based model in which artists researched the history of a place, determined their own sites, and formed community and place attach-

ments to create site-specific and place-specific installations. She speaks to the power of history and the ability of art (or at least the systems that produce the art) in these situations to impact life and society:

It is when exhibitions speak about issues related to or inspired by a chosen site, pointing to the contemporary power of the past, and making connections between art and society, that they must fulfill a role that befits their real-life situation, that demonstrates the necessity for this art to be outside a museum's walls, and, at the same time, impacts the theoretical discourses of art today.<sup>1</sup>

She lays out a difficult task for such work, and perhaps an awareness of these imperatives explains why painters like Wangechi Mutu and Mark Bradford departed so dramatically from their usual practices for Prospect.1 New Orleans, both creating large-scale sculptural works with a community dimension (“the social sculpture aspect” as Prospect.1 associate curator Claire Tancons calls it, borrowing a phrase from Joseph Beuys).<sup>2</sup> Neither could their pieces exist anywhere else than where they were sited, unlike some of the artwork in other biennial locations like the Contemporary Art Center. Though works like El Anatsui's ubiquitous foil tapestries, Lee Bul's beaded chandelier, and Fred Tomaselli's patterned paintings took on a carnivalesque quality just by inhabiting New Orleans, as *Frieze* writer Steven Stern observed, the Ninth Ward artists went beyond symbolism and representational space to bore into actual socio-spatial production.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps most illustrative of this production is the mobilization of relationships around a few of these installations. Unlike Elizabeth Schambelan of *Artforum*, who writes about these pieces like ossified, melancholy monuments to a wiped-out neighborhood (she describes Nari Ward's *Diamond Gym*, sited in the abandoned Battleground Baptist Church, as “keeping its own murmuring counsel in an abandoned church in a silent, empty neighborhood”),<sup>4</sup> I saw the installations as nodes for life and interaction in a place that many avoided, even before the storm. *Diamond Gym* evoked the huge and iconic spectacle of a super-sized biennial installation, with iron gemstone forms filled with gym equipment and reiterated by mirrors and lights, but the community wall filled with flyers and missives revealed the time the artist had spent talking to the Battleground Baptist Church's dispersed but still existing congregation. Claire Tancons describes Ward's commitment to this particular group of people:

Nari would have come at least three times, maybe four times... he essentially spent a lot of time here. Weeks at a time working with Isaiah [McCormick, nephew of Keith Calhoun and Chandra McCormick of L9 Arts Center]...so he had a nice team of local Prospect.1 folks, or otherwise. But his project entailed his reaching out to the pastor of the congregation of the church within which his work is housed. So, following Katrina, the congregation no longer used the church and relocated to another church, but Nari went to see the pastor several times, attended Mass. I did actually once as well, on a Sunday, I remember very





House foundation in Lower Ninth Ward.

well. So that's a great case of the way in which some of the artists would go about really making strong connections with the neighborhood and community.<sup>5</sup>

In reactivating the space, he was not calling for a return or memorializing a history, but shining a light on the strength of a social network that would continue to persist.

Wangechi Mutu, unlike Ward, rarely engages in social practice, but her *House for Miss Sarah* (2008) focused in on the single, ongoing story of one Katrina survivor. A tale with metaphorical implications, *Miss Sarah* is a venerable community leader in the Ninth Ward whose house was first washed away by Katrina, then destroyed a second time by unscrupulous contractors who swindled the elderly woman out of her insurance money. Mutu created a folly on Miss Sarah's property, a few darkly painted beams outlining the footprint and forms of a house-to-be, strewn with Christmas lights dovetailing towards a single rocking chair in the center evoking the woman herself. This visible sculpture, which prompted many residents and visitors to ask questions about Miss Sarah, where she had gone, and when she would return, also physically represented a more invisible aspect of the piece. On the opening weekend, Mutu held an auction of her work to create a fund for Miss Sarah to rebuild her house, with the idea that the actual

structure would slowly replace the folly. The poetics of the intended life of this piece intermixed with its modest but real exchange begins to answer the question that *Artforum* editor Elizabeth Schambelan poses in her piece on Prospect.1: "What kind of dispensation can a contemporary art biennial offer?"<sup>6</sup> The art itself, taken on its own—perhaps not much. But the combination of individual efforts by artists to instill a measure of reciprocity into the system of art production, complemented by the trickle-down effects of tourism dollars, makes a strong case that art, economy, and social rebuilding are not contradictory elements. Perhaps they are a bit "messy," as Glenn Ligon admits in his *Artforum* piece, but not mutually exclusive.<sup>7</sup>

Mark Bradford's engagement in the Ninth Ward, which went far beyond his iconic piece *Mithra* (2008), a giant wooden ark-shape built around a shipping container of plywood salvaged from construction sites around Los Angeles, is perhaps the best example of how an artist affected the spatial representations and conceptions of the Ninth Ward through his own relationship to an existing socio-spatial network. In following what was essentially Prospect.1 curator Dan Cameron's single curatorial requirement,<sup>8</sup> to visit New Orleans before the opening of Prospect.1, Bradford "stumbled upon" Keith Calhoun and Chandra McCormick renovating their





Battleground Baptist Church.

double-wide shotgun house into the studios and gallery space known as L9 Arts Center. Though Bradford's donation of a painting that raised \$65,000 for L9 has been much publicized, Calhoun and McCormick's reciprocal effect on the Biennial is less noted.<sup>9</sup> With overtones of colonialist rhetoric, they are often described as the passive recipients of Mark Bradford's and Dan Cameron's largesse, even in their own words. Keith Calhoun says:

I think it's just a great thing for me and Chandra because we wasn't even Biennial artists, so, with Mark Bradford's supporting efforts here, helping us to arrange certain works and putting the collection together, you know, it's been great for us because now we get the world to see our work, right here in the Lower Ninth Ward, so that shows me that power of art. I mean, even if I was in a big mainstream gallery, right now I might not have the type of people coming to L9, so we're honored to have that support right now.<sup>10</sup>

Prospect.1 associate curator Claire Tancons, however, describes Calhoun and McCormick's undeniable importance to the success of the Ninth Ward installations and therefore Prospect.1, giving them most of the credit for the spatial production occurring there:

The story with Mark is that he is actually the one who quote unquote 'discovered'—it sounds very colonial—Keith and Chandra... stumbled upon Keith and Chandra, brought them to Dan [Cameron]'s awareness, following which he decided to include L9 as one of our official sites. And again, it's really from Mark's encounter with Keith and Chandra that the entire Lower Ninth Ward site, if you see it as a site of its own, took shape. If there hadn't been that encounter, I am not quite sure that Dan had intended to select the Lower Ninth Ward as a site for projects.<sup>11</sup>

Tancons went on to say that she did not want to speak for Cameron's intentions, for she knew that he did want to spread the Biennial sites across the city so as to take people "out of their comfort zone," which of course means different things to different groups of people, but

what she was certain about was that "none of what you see in the Lower Ninth Ward would have happened the way it did without Keith and Chandra."<sup>12</sup> Keith Calhoun and Chandra McCormick as well as their nephew Isaiah McCormick had knowledge and a network that was beyond the capacity of the Biennial—they were repositories of information on the diasporic community of the Ninth Ward, able to negotiate site permissions from displaced owners, facilitate the research of artists like Wangechi Mutu (they introduced her to their former neighbor Miss Sarah), and legitimize the work of international artists in the community.

It is because of this networked presence implicit in the works themselves and evident in the activity permeating the Ninth Ward (not completely abandoned or overtaken over by the inexorable encroachment of the bayou, as Elizabeth Schambelan of *Artforum* would have us believe) that a spatial shift begins to occur. The conceptual understanding of the space was dramatically altered by the storm—once residential space, the neighborhood now rests in a liminal category. Most of the northern part of the Ward is stripped of buildings, with only concrete steps, an odd mailbox, or leftover foundations reminding visitors of its pre-storm vitality. Some of the lots are beyond overgrown, indicating abandonment or uncertain status—others are neatly mowed and landscaped, sometimes with signage or the beginnings of reconstruction marking the site. This space is certainly not public, but neither is it completely private. Only the devastation of Katrina allows spectators to experience the queasy feeling of standing in what was once someone's living room, without that person's permission or knowledge. This liminality and the open negotiation between artists and residents regarding how to approach such a situation is inevitably what opened the space for art in the Lower Ninth.

Although the Ninth Ward can be conceptualized prior to Katrina, the perceptions and symbolic space there (what French scholar Henri Lefebvre calls representational space) are still largely determined by media coverage of the storm itself. Scenes of Ninth Ward residents on rooftops, the incredible devastation, racialized response, and the associated spectatorial guilt, creates what Schambelan calls a "permanent meniscus" between perception and reality. She is one of the few critics who does not succumb to the phenomenological pleasures of aestheticizing the Ninth Ward and the city as a whole, but questions art's role in such a thoroughly mediated space. In this analysis, it is clear that she means the Ninth Ward, not the French Quarter or the Warehouse Arts District, and she ultimately leaves it to the viewer to decide how to negotiate spectatorship.<sup>13</sup> To artist John Barnes, Jr., however, the spatial practices of the Biennial (through individuals like Keith Calhoun, Chandra McCormick, and Mark Bradford) is creating a new iconic status for the Ninth Ward that goes beyond devastation:



Mark Bradford, *Mithra* (2008), reproduced courtesy of the artist.

There's never been a venue of this scale that has not been completely contained and managed in the French Quarter, where all the city's tax dollars and resources and police force are assigned to do. So they're sending out people to all these different neighborhoods so that is a taboo that's been violated, that needed to be violated. And that group of the wealthy of the city, they aren't really part of this conversation, and I think that's where your harshest criticisms are gonna come from, from people in those areas, who feel left out of all this. So I think you're going to start to see a lot of development in the Ninth Ward. It's now an icon, the Ninth Ward. It's now the ultimate symbol that sums up this whole thing, the Ninth Ward. And progress in the Ninth Ward spells progress for everything. If there's nothing happening in the Ninth Ward, then there can't be any real progress.<sup>14</sup>

To Barnes, the Ninth Ward is symbolic of power structures being rewritten, and resonates with the ideas of French scholar Jacques Rancière. Rancière offers us some answer to Elizabeth Schambelan's question about art's role in such an environment, positing that "critical art intends to raise consciousness of the mechanisms of domination in order to turn the spectator into a conscious agent in the transformation of the world."<sup>15</sup> In the case of the Ninth Ward, it is not the art itself—which largely evokes the perceptions of the past Ninth Ward

through boats, images of destruction, and ghost houses—but the spatial practices of certain individuals that claimed such space for art that will transform perceptions and future conceptualizations of the neighborhood.

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All photos by Sue Bell Yank.

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- 3 Steven Stern, "Prospect.1 New Orleans," *Frieze Magazine* September (2008), [http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/prospect1\\_new\\_orleans](http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/prospect1_new_orleans)
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- 6 Schambelan, 174.
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- 9 Doug MacCash, "A Home for Art," *The Times-Picayune*, November 30, 2007, <http://www.nola.com/lagniappe/t-p/index.ssf?/base/entertainment-0/1196403845178840.xml&coll=1>
- 10 Keith Calhoun, interview with author, November 15, 2008.
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- 12 Claire Tancons, interview with author, November 16, 2008.
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- 14 John Barnes, Jr., interview with author, November 14, 2008.
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## ***It could run through a forest... Radically remaking the I-710 Corridor***

BY ASHWANI VASISHTH

Goods movement is a fact of life in the current globalized economy. We have off-shored so much of our manufacturing that, definitionally, the only way we can possibly get access to the huge range of goods we consume on an everyday basis is by having them shipped into our country. This means cargo ships, and this means trucks and trains. Diesel, in short, and lots of it.

The thing about diesel, though, is that it generates tons (literally and figuratively) of teeny tiny toxic particles—particles that are small enough to get into our lungs and into our blood stream. Economic growth is killing us. Slowly, but surely we're dying, even as we grow.

Interstate 710 runs for 23 miles between Long Beach and Alhambra in the Los Angeles basin. The freeway is 46 years old and heavily traveled, averaging about 160,000 vehicle trips per day. Trucks carrying cargo from the ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles account for something like 15 percent of the freeway's total traffic. So there are about 50,000 truck trips per day in to and out of the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, and the number is estimated to double to 100,000 trips per day by 2025.

In Long Beach, more than 15 percent of children under 17 have been diagnosed with asthma, higher than the county rate of 12 percent and the national rate of 8 percent. At least 20,000 children, many from the 90813 postal code, have asthma. What this means is that there are at least 4,000 more cases of asthma in the Long Beach area than we might normally expect in Southern California and 10,000 more than the US average. At least arguably, there are more than 4,000 cases of asthma in Long Beach that have likely been caused by people living closer than 1,000 feet to the I-710 freeway.

But pulmonary ailments are only the fourth leading cause of death in Long Beach. Heart disease, strokes and cancer are the three leading causes of death. We have good reason to believe that traffic pollution is associated with each one of these. For instance, there are at least 3,000 more cases of cancer in some neighborhoods in Long Beach than one would expect to see in some comparable pollution-free neighborhood.

We can debate the numbers, but the bald fact is this: there are at least a few hundred people dying in Long Beach, right now as you read this, because they live closer to a freeway than they ought to do. Of course, there are doubtless many causes for these illnesses. But the I-710 is certainly one of those causes and if we do not act to change this, are we not, bluntly speaking, assisting in inducing death?

What can we do, though? Well, in principle, there are three broad options.

1. We can change the vehicles that travel the freeway, such as the kinds of trucks allowed to use the 710 and the port complex.

2. We can change the distance that people live from the freeway, because it is in their best interest to live further away.

3. We can change what happens within that distance by planting a 500-foot deep forest of trees along the 710 or even every major freeway in Los Angeles.

### **OPTION 1: TRUCK REGULATION**

The United States has long bowed to the grossly mistaken but perceived economic self-interest of the trucking industry, by allowing a cruder form of diesel to be sold here than in, for instance, Europe. American diesel has long had much higher content of sulfur. This matters, because this high sulfur content has meant that US diesel vehicles could not be equipped with catalytic converters. Unlike Europe, where diesel cars are common and relatively clean, US diesel vehicles have been allowed to kill with impunity.

Its only recently that the US joined modern economies in prescribing a low-sulfur formulation for diesel. This is a good thing. But millions of existing trucks in the US will continue to operate without catalytic converters for years to come. It will be decades before the natural aging cycle of trucks will take the older machines off the road, to be replaced by newer, less polluting machines. This is a bad thing.

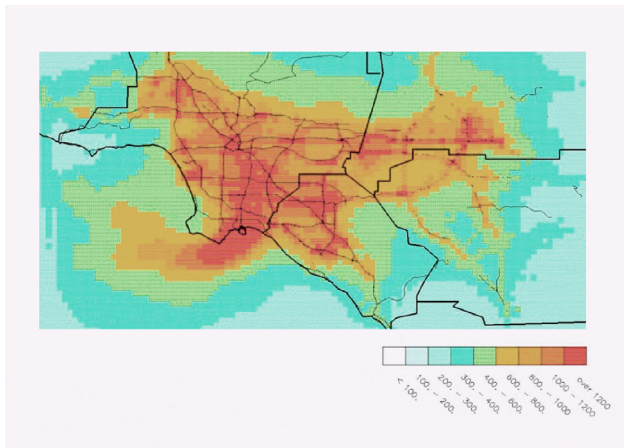
But we could insist that in areas where truck traffic is heavy, only trucks that are equipped with catalytic converters will be allowed to operate. The I-710 freeway—or, perhaps, the San Pedro port complex—could be declared off-bounds for older vehicles that operate without suitable emission control devices. Don't we owe ourselves that much?

### **OPTION 2: MOVE HOUSING AWAY FROM FREEWAYS**

As for controlling where people live, well, do we condone suicide? Would we, knowingly, let someone go to certain, preventable death? Would we allow practices that certainly endanger human life? If we let people live closer to freeways than a 1,000 feet, we are, actually and factually, doing just that. How can we justify this? We now know that proximity to a freeway is a significant cause of death. Just as carcinogens are taken off the market once we become aware that they are, indeed, carcinogens, we should move people away from pollution sources such as freeways that are statistically certain to be the cause of tens of hundreds of deaths.

### **OPTION 3: FREEWAY FOREST GREENBELTS**

And then there are the trees! Here's the thing: pollution from freeways "decays" with distance. Concentrations of toxic particles drop to near-background levels about 1,500 feet from the freeway. And trees can help cut this



Cancer risk correlates to freeways in Southern California and the Port of L.A. and Long Beach complex. Estimated cancer risk for the south coast air basin, excess cases per million population. Source: South Coast Air Quality Management District, [www.aqmd.gov](http://www.aqmd.gov).

distance, perhaps to half. So, if we planted dense groves of appropriate species of trees, in 500 to 750-foot deep belts on either side of the segment of the I-710 freeway most heavily trafficked by trucks, we would effectively save ourselves a few hundred deaths per year.

How can we do this? How can we not!

Trees act in a variety of ways to capture air pollution from the ambient atmosphere, from the direct absorption of some gases to the physical capture of toxic dust particles on leafy surfaces and in the cracks and crevices of their trunks and branches. Of course, trees and plants give off gasses too, which is referred to as biogenic emission, and so care is needed in selecting the species used.

But filtering out air pollution is only a small part of what trees do for us. They provide habitat for a diverse array of species, ranging from below-ground microbes and fungi to birds and bees. They capture and sequester carbon in the form of carbon dioxide, which is a greenhouse gas, thus helping to check global climate change. And while it is true that some of this captured carbon is re-emitted into the atmosphere when trees die and decay, a significant portion of the carbon captured by trees is retained below-ground in the roots that extend deep into the soil.

Perhaps most importantly, trees capture rainwater and facilitate ground water recharge. It has been estimated that a mature tree can help capture and entrain as much as 750 cubic feet of water. This is water that is returned to the below-ground aquifer, and water that is diverted away from the stormwater system, making for a double savings. Think about it! Hundreds of thousands of vehicles running across a freeway segment, laying down nano-layer after nano-layer of toxic exhaust gases, day in and day out, month after month, until the road surface is thick with pollution. And then you get the first rain event of the season, and much of that pollution gets

washed away into stormwater drains, most likely headed out to the ocean thick with pollution

Instead, if we were to plant 500-foot swaths of trees on either side of our freeways, that soil could be used to infiltrate this polluted water into the ground, where microbial action would break the pollutants down to their harmless constitutive elements. Indeed, there are good reasons to plant these trees. Besides the habitat and aesthetic value, we get pollution control devices that capture air-borne toxic particles, which then get washed into the soil when it rains

As for relocating people who currently live too close to freeways for their own good, we have options that would serve to keep them in the neighborhoods of their choice—by densifying existing urban fabrics using smart growth techniques. This would allow people to move to dwellings in their current neighborhoods, making it possible to retain the social capital that they have accrued in the years of living in a place, while reducing the environmental health costs of staying in that place.

A comprehensive strategy of tree planting, strategic relocation and vehicle modification would allow us to capture the monetary and cultural capital accruing from globalization, while minimizing the environmental health costs of that growth. We would have denser neighborhoods, more healthful and more aesthetically pleasing for their inhabitants, even as we accommodate needed growth in goods movement traffic.

Life is not a zero-sum game. We can indeed craft win-win-win solutions, on a case by case basis. Lets do this thing!

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## The City Demands a Narrative

A STORYSCAPE BY GERARD OLSON

(PART ONE OF THREE)



This is the result: Dozens of people every day find themselves killing the rest of the people in the cities and then turning the knife, gun or screwdriver upon themselves. Dozens of people every day are kidnapped by politicians and kept in cages in the basement of a military complex in South Dakota.

Being a superpower is not having control over your limbs. Being a superpower is lonely.

This is what happens first: The cities all merge into themselves. The cities are one city. The cities separate from each other. The cities are not one city. The city sprawls, but not that much; it stretches across fields. The city is afraid of its populations and the overriding order that being a city requires.

We come down to the zoo. It is Friday afternoon. But the city is a timeless state. It is. Maybe.

The monkeys are out of their cages in the zoo in the city as it sprawls across fields. The monkeys are biting all the patrons and spreading diseases.

The diseases infect the patron's heads.

The patrons become delirious with viral infection. They see themselves as eels inside a giant, breathing whale's jaws. Do you understand? Should we clarify?

The city shivers under this sudden influence of mind disease.

Mind disease can destroy a city.

There are thirty-nine infected patrons. They are violent. They act heroically against the city.

They are doomed.

The city doesn't say anything about the event to its populations. Being a superpower is freeing. It is the key to a chest filled with bloody teeth. Three trucks leave the city in the dark in the night and leave their cargo in the desert.

Being a superpower does not mean being proud of one's actions.

Here is a better example: The city invites you to the movies and then to dinner. You watch a cowboy film about revenge. The city suggests that the film was about justice. You disagree. Justice is what hides in your closet after crawling up from the sea: it watches you undress or redress, slime running down its scales.

You do not call the city afterwards.

One morning, the city is in your front yard with the police. The city has planted drugs in your living room. You are arrested and sent to prison where Mormon guards break your ribs. And burly men abuse you with sex.

We are really living it up. We sure are. Things do not fall apart around us.

One night, we come home and find the city masturbating to a mouse exploding in the microwave. The furniture is all overturned. Our son is nowhere to be found. Where is our dog and why isn't it protecting us? Why don't we have a spouse?

We come down to the city again. You work at a hospital. Your clothes are white. You are a 37 year old nurse with three children and an ex-husband who stands outside your daughter's window at night, breathing. You are at work: A man comes into the hospital.

He has a broken leg.

He tried to jump off the roof of a bar, he didn't want to be part of his body anymore: on certain days he believes in levitation, on certain days he hears the insects in his walls. He hands you a note.

He touches your wrist.

He looks into your eyes.

Try this: for a second, everybody in the waiting room around you turns into sand and you are the only biological creatures in the city. Eventually, the entire world is flooding and you are drowning. Before you die, you both turn into eels and swim away.

The water recedes. Everybody turns back into biology again, instead of sand. This is the most horrible thing that ever happened to you, ever. The man pulls out a grenade and throws it onto the smiling magazine table in the waiting room. Everybody dies, cruelly. But, your children grow up okay.

There are several methods, we understand.

Dozens of people every day grow wings and escape the city. Dozens of people every day find themselves looking out at the ocean and wondering why they weren't born as something more worthwhile, like a rock. Dozens of people every day melt their families and ooze into the dirt.

How about: We are far above the city, in the clouds. We cannot see the city. All that we see is clouds. The clouds make us think of jellyfish.

We are jellyfish.

We communicate by flashing light at each other. We live in the clouds and flash light at each other. The city builds upon itself and rises into the clouds. It tells us that we don't have form. We are shapeless. We take form. We have arms. We have legs. We cannot flash light. We make noise instead. We get jobs.

Being a superpower is freeing. Being a superpower means being all-encompassing. Being a superpower really helps me help you.

To clarify: the city is the escaped monkeys from the zoo in the city. Or: the city is the man in the hospital waiting room.

Or: The city is also the city. It stretches over the fields.

Not to be banal, but do you see what we're getting at? The city comes into your living room and eats your

sofa. You ask the city where you will sit. The city replies that you will sit in its lap and caress its beard.

We are back at the zoo. We walk past a tree. A monkey jumps down onto our shoulder and bites our neck. We flail or bat at the monkey. We beat the monkey. Viral infections make their way through our blood. They destroy our blood cells. Or: they multiply.

Being a superpower is to be feverish.

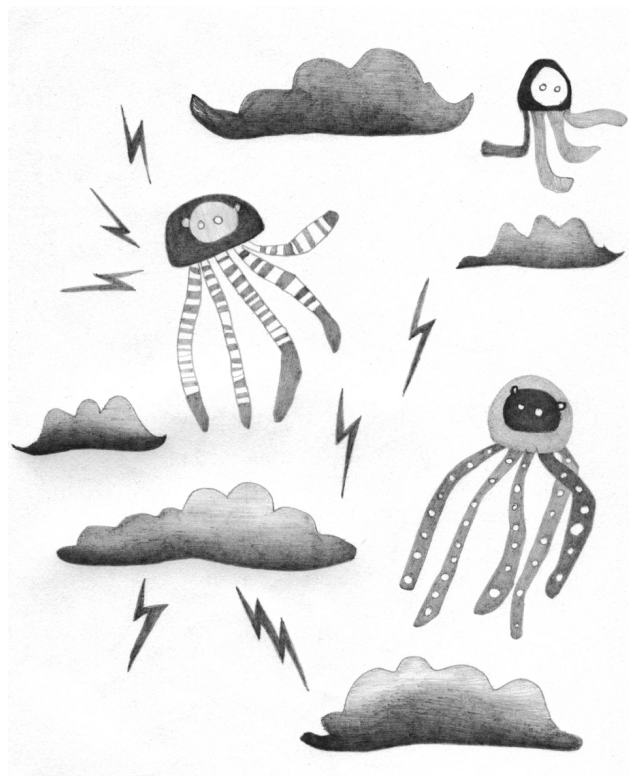
We become political. Can we be political, is it allowed? We march through the city. We demand certain changes, standing atop a building, shouting.

All the buildings in the city become transparent. The city doesn't exist. What city?

There is sand everywhere. We argue amongst ourselves. There is no water. We realize that our problem was not the city, but, rather, the people inside. The city was never a problem, what city? We find ourselves killing the rest of the people and turning the knife, gun or screwdriver upon ourselves. Dozens of people every day find themselves doing this.

So: the city wants to be a narrative. It wanders the city with knives. It wants to feel like history or weight. A fog covers the city. A video camera tapes the whole thing for posterity's sake.

The 39 mind-diseased monkey bite victims come through the fog. They are screaming. They are singing and laughing. They are spraying graffiti on everything. They drink. They don't drink. They are sober. They make arts and crafts. They are completely naked. Or, they



Illustrations by Teira Johnson.

have clothes. Honestly, we really don't care. It's too boring for us. We're interested in things of importance.

The city sneaks into your room at night and uses a little hose to drain blood from your arm. The city likes to collect biology. You begin to wake up in the mornings and feel drawn-out. You constantly faint. You can't explain why you feel so dry. You are empty. Your body is running dry. Drought. So incredibly dry. One night there is nothing left for the city to drain. You die. With hope, your kids turn out okay.

Is this becoming too literal, perhaps?

Try this: Ignore the city. Stop thinking about it. Imagine a bird. What color is it? It is black. It is red. Like oil black. Like cancer black. Imagine the bird. What color, again? It is black. It is red. Like tongue red. Like taste and sight red. Biology red. Where is the bird? Stop it! Where is the bird? In a tree. Its feathers are ruffled. What color are the ruffled feathers? They are black. They are red. It is raining. No? It is raining. Stop it! The bird is shivering. Water collects on its feathers. Imagine the bird. Imagine the bird on television. Imagine the bird in a tree in the swamps at the outskirts of the city. Have you forgotten about the city? No. I'm so tired of the city. We need another preoccupation. We try sex. We think about trying religion. We amputate ourselves. We ignore the bird. The bird is made of sand. It is raining. Look into the sky. There should be clouds. No? There are clouds. They are grey and black. They are heavy. We are inside the clouds. We are before time. We are time. We will stack dying future upon dying future upon dying future upon dying future upon dying future upon and upward and over. We are the city. Had you forgotten about the city?

Being a superpower is, by definition, a state of repression. Or: imminent.

The monkeys in the zoo are captured and burned. The 39 victims are in a square downtown. They are naked. They are in the throes of their parasite's ecstasy. They stand up to the city. The city is temporary to them. Everything is temporary for them. The virus does not live in a narrative state. It is showing the victims how to defeat narrative.

So: We light a chapel on fire?

We have a meat cleaver in the kitchen?

What about if we file our teeth with our teeth?

We commit resistance.

Can we commit resistance?

Even, because: the body is a weaker city than the city. The viruses are persuasive.

Being a superpower makes your fingers swell, makes you constipated, makes your sweat glands overactive.

We are dreaming about the ocean. We are dreaming about the ocean. We are dreaming about the ocean. Our grandchildren are running on the beach. They are not our grandchildren. They are ourselves in our childhood. We are running in the waves like children. Or: as



children. The water comes up to our waists. It recedes. Our legs are blanketed with crabs. They crawl up our back. We feel their legs in our skin—their cold legs, sharp in our skin and dark; we are paralyzed and sick. Our grandparents are on the shore screaming and laughing alternately. Those aren't our grandparents. They are ourselves in our childhood? No. We try not to focus on the crabs. Those aren't our grandparents. The crabs are on our faces. They move in cold jerking motions. We focus on the clouds. There is a bird in the clouds and those aren't our grandparents on shore. The crabs cut off our eyelids with their claws. We are paralyzed. We have to stare at the bird above us until our grandparents collect our grandchildren and we all go home. If those aren't our grandparents, who are we? Also, in the dream we don't really go home.

We come down to the city. We come down too fast. We crash through the clouds or the trees or through the roof of the monkey cage. Our back hurts. We are laying in a pile of leaves. There is a hole in the roof of the monkey cage, where we came through. We are reminded of our physical presence. We have form. Our spine is broken. Also, our leg. We came down too fast. We do not know how to maneuver in the city.

The city stands over us, with a tongue. We can't do anything. We are broken. The monkeys escape from the hole in the roof of the cage. There are children on the other side of the monkey pen. They see the monkeys escaping. They see us. The city is disguised as a rock. We are jealous. The city pulls open our stomach and eats our guts. We are gutless. The city has our guts. The city likes to have biology.

Why the sudden physicality? Why the sudden move to a specific body? This is a critique that the city later gives us about our narrative.

Still, we don't commit resistance. We stand in crowds.

The city fondles itself.

Things never fall apart around us. They can't. We feel too good.

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Gerard Olson is a writer who often does things. For example, swimming in lakes. Also, most of the time he likes things. For example, bubbles. And fingers.

## Wok the Dog

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHARLIE GROSSO



(left) *Cages Are Nice*, Shangri La, China 2007

(right) *Bones*, Gynatse, Tibet 2007









(left) *Goat Heads*, Shigatse, Tibet, 2007

(right) *Yak Head and Chess*, Shangri La, China 2007

“Wok the Dog” began as an exploration of childhood fears. Clean, brightly lit supermarkets didn’t exist in Taipei in the early 80’s. Groceries were bought at old-fashioned markets where mothers and wives knew the best vegetable vender, the butcher with the best cuts and the couple that sold the cheapest fruit. The markets were dark, full of pungent smells; floors were slick with blood and water. The sounds of caged and dying animals filled the space. Being three feet tall, I was afraid of getting lost in the crowd, taken by the butcher, caged, and sold.

At 18, I returned to Taiwan and to the markets, wanting to see what had made me so afraid. The markets had changed. They were now more sanitary, brighter and air-conditioned. But the struggle of life and death remained.

For ten years now, I have photographed the markets in various parts of the world. What was once fear has turned into an examination of the commerce of life: the death of the animal sustains our lives and the liveli-





hood of the vendors. I realize how purchasing packaged meats at supermarkets made me forget about where food comes from. It creates a sense of detachment and dulls the awareness of what makes up a dinner. There is a harmony between man and food that comes from cherishing our dinner and acknowledging that the pork chop on the plate once had four legs and a beating heart.

After a couple of years of photographing markets, I looked beyond the animals, and saw the vendors and their lives. I see the butcher and fish-monger, who have surrounded their days with death; produce sellers singularly devoted to the one item. I asked myself, "How is it possible for someone to live on such a meager inventory of goods?" Yet, these same vendors return day after day, year after year. Surprisingly, I found more humanity and joy in the portraits of the vendors, these death dealers, than one would expect.

In a single breath it became clear to me. There is a sanctity ingrained in death, a truth in that we are animals too. We are beasts eating beasts. Recognizing the truth of it enhances our humanity; the bestiality lies in our avoidance. "Wok the Dog" is about our mortality and the cost of our sustained lives, and about understanding the full karmic consequences of our dinner.

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Charlie Grosso is a photographer based in Los Angeles. For more of her Wok the Dog series and other work, visit [charliestudio.com](http://charliestudio.com).

## Attempts on Life

BY DAVID SNYDER

The summer of my cousin Isaac's wedding, Chris and I were out of work. I had been living in Boston gaining life experience, which is to say I was lonely and miserable. An example of a moment from my Boston life:

I came around the corner on the third floor of 698 Mass Ave. (a Brownstone where I worked as a janitor) and there's a mouse in the middle of the floor, laid out exactly in the middle of the long hallway. It was a dead mouse, and it didn't appear to have died of natural causes. It looked like it had been stomped flat. From just a few feet away, it could have been a jelly-filled chocolate donut hole that had been run over by a car. Unfortunately though, it was exactly what it was: a crushed mouse that was stuck to the dirty linoleum in the dead center of this run-down, thirty single-unit, all-male building's third floor hallway. Those dim overhead fluorescents were humming and flickering, and the single window at the end of the long hall shook in its frame now and then from that bastard Boston wind. There wasn't any other sound, and I was all alone, crouching down and peeling the mouse from the tile.

I took the squeaky brown vinyl back staircase up to the fourth floor, where I finished my sweeping. I came back down for the mop, turned the corner on the third floor and there was the mouse again, right where it had been before I'd scraped it up and thrown it in the trash bag on my cart. I looked in the bag; it contained one dead mouse, flat. So here was a new stomped-on mouse in the exact same spot as the last one had been just minutes ago, which made sense insofar as all the flattened mice I'd ever seen were to be found right there, in the middle of this floor. Who did this, what does this mean? They were like those old office memo cards, ones that read: "While You Were Out..." I scraped the second mouse up and left work six hours early. Puss in Boots struck two more times and someone pooped in a sink before I decided to quit and leave the state of Massachusetts for the rest of my life.

Chris had been in New York for a while at this point, working as a window coordinator on the upper West Side for a property management company that for the better part of a year didn't know that there's no such thing as a window coordinator. One of the buildings the company managed was a coop that had just had all of its windows replaced, and they hired Chris to be the liaison between the management and any tenants who had questions or concerns about the new windows. He would show up to the office in a suit and tie, 9:00 sharp, sit down at his desk and wait for the calls to come in. They must have been fine windows, because no one ever called, no one except for friends who had his work number. We'd ask him questions, like: "How come they get all dark at night?" or "How can I tell if they're open?", and momentarily Chris's voice

would be alert and eager on the other end of the line before he realized the joke.

For forty hours a week, he would be waiting for a call, for a sense of purpose, for job security. He sat in a swivel chair at a desk with a telephone that couldn't dial out, just waiting and waiting. Eventually, the man who had hired Chris in the first place did a double take outside his office door. It turned out that this man and effectively the entire company had just forgotten about Chris immediately after hiring him—the windows were out of warranty by this point, the position was only supposed to have been for two weeks. He had been there nine months.

And so, Chris was free the summer of his brother's wedding. We had talked about spending the summer doing some big project. There was rafting the Mississippi and biking across Mongolia but both were way too expensive. Instead, we decided to help out on my Aunt Sue's property, where the wedding would be, and as a side project, we started smoking.

We'd both tried smoking before, but it never took. My first cigarettes were the Merits I'd stolen out of my aunt Laura's purse when I was 12. Chris and I had smoked them down by the trailer in the woods about a mile from the house. They burned my throat because I didn't know how to inhale; I'd just suck the smoke into my mouth and swallow it. I remember that it tasted like raisins and blood. I remember that we were definitely going to start smoking. During high school I'd buy packs, smoke a few and just sort of forget about them. I'd come home and my mom would sniff the air and say "You been smoking?" and I'd realize I'd forgotten to, things had just come up and I'd gotten distracted. "Tomorrow", I'd promise myself, "I'm definitely going to smoke." I even tried the patch, with no success. Nothing seemed to work.

For our new attempt at smoking, we decided that we'd really have to be disciplined about it if we were serious about getting addicted; we had to keep to a schedule. We bought a massive tin of tobacco and five hundred papers. At first, we could only manage to share a single smoke after dinner, but after we had adjusted and crossed that threshold of feeling like we were going to throw up after a few puffs, we managed to be able to handle our own separate cigarettes. Pretty soon we were each having three or four a day, all by ourselves. It gave us a real feeling of accomplishment. That summer, my morning routine consisted of a cup of coffee and a nice thick rollie, followed immediately by me running into the woods to shit explosively. We were staying in the old trailer where we'd started smoking; we'd helped Chris's dad fix up when we were sixteen or so, before he went away. The plumbing didn't work though, so you had to watch your step.

By the beginning of June, we'd started making a dance floor for the wedding party out in the field a hundred yards or so from the trailer. We weren't mak-



ing amazing progress, but it was pleasant work. We were surrounded by billowing hills, fields of long grass almost visibly bleaching to hay, everything swaddled in this limber valley by the dark woods and danced into life by a young sun and languorous breezes. It was the kind of early summer atmosphere that made you pause on the verge of hammering, carefully set down the board and nail and ask yourself whether or not you had any tobacco left in your pocket. We'd drive the thirty miles into town for a box of screws in case we somehow were to use up those four boxes we still had left. It was a season of dreaming, it was the summer of the 25-cent hamburger deal at McDonald's. Anyway, we were just trying to make a big board that people could dance on, and that's not so hard.

A mile away, back up at the house, Aunt Sue was under a lot of pressure. With less than a month to go, the burden of playing host to the wedding of her oldest son was all consuming. We hardly saw her at all. She'd be up at dawn and off to work, then go back to the house where she'd spend the evening trying to coordinate all the details. There was the food, the liquor, the tent, the tables and chairs, the expanding guest list. There was the siding to be replaced on the house, the doors that had fallen off the barn, the big partially exposed boulder in the roadway that knocked against low-slung axels when people drove up, and of course there was this beaver.

She was enumerating her woes one evening while we were up at the house. "A beaver? What's wrong with it, is it sick?" No, the beaver was fine: it had been making a massive lodge out in the pond ten yards from the house. It had dammed up the outflow, the water was rising and if someone didn't stop it pretty soon the foundation would be flooded and the old house would collapse and Aunt Sue would be down with us in the trailer.

She'd had a trapper come and assess the situation, and he said he could drown it for a couple hundred bucks. We were a little shocked that she hadn't asked us to take care of the situation; we were men, we smoked. And who would kill a beaver by drowning it? That's cruel! That's unfair! Why couldn't you just trap it and just let it go somewhere? Or at least shoot it, you know? Kill it quickly and face to face.

Sue was skeptical. We didn't have any experience with this sort of thing; we'd never trapped anything, much less killed anything.

"Of course," she said turning to Chris, "there is that old twenty-two Dale used to shoot bears with." Dale being Uncle Dale, Chris's father, who had run off to Key West with Dee, a waitress from Oneonta, who now called herself Lola.

"Bears" was what Aunt Sue called woodchucks, I have no idea why.

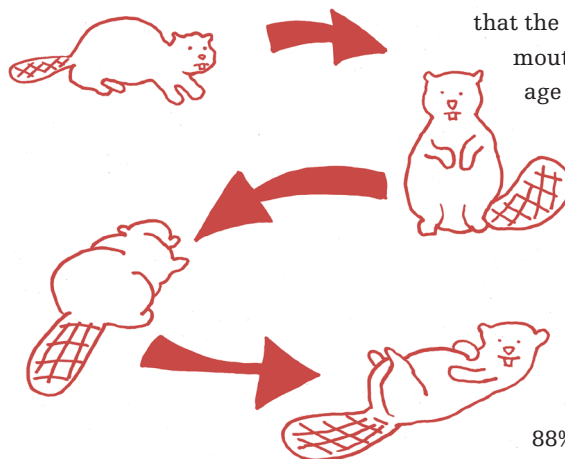
We didn't want to kill the beaver, but we did want to shoot the gun. I had never wanted to use a gun before, and neither had Chris. Neither of us had any interest in hunting or even killing things for fun that might not technically be considered hunting in the strict legal sense. That all seemed like cruelty: "What did those deer do to you?" Or, "Come on—you know that wasn't no wolf, it has name tags on for Christsakes!"

But defending the property in a shooting sort of way seemed like a great idea at the time, and it turns out that there are very few ways of getting rid of a beaver short of assassination. We did a lot of research. Some things we learned about beavers:

Beavers are the world's second largest rodent, they can grow to be longer than five feet and over 100 pounds, not too shabby! They are supposed to be responsible for three quarters of the North American prairie, having flooded ancient woodlands, drowning all the trees until everything dried up and grass took over. They are indiscriminately herbivorous, so you can't bait a trap with treats because it's all the same to them. If cornered, a beaver can kill a German Shepard.

Besides shooting, poisoning, or the method of trapping them that involves drowning them at the underwater entrance to their lodge, the surefire way to get rid of a beaver is to exploit its most poignant and adorable weakness: beavers hate the sound of running water. For them, this represents insecurity; if the water is trickling, the beaver understands that the water level in the pond or lake or river or wherever the beaver has made it lodge is going down, which means that the lodge is closer to shore, in shallower water, and more exposed. Beavers have been known to drag mud and sticks into Laundromats in order to stop up that diabolical trickle. They will plug up speakers that play a recording of running water. They can't stand it. The more modern and supposedly more humane beaver deterrents all involve running lengths of pipe from the high-elevation inflow of a body of water to the area where the water is deepest. The pipe has to be elevated at least a foot over the

surface of the water at the point of outflow so that the beaver, treading water wildly with a mouthful of sticks and mud, can't manage to reach the aperture of the flowing pipe. Frustrated in a profound, species-specific way, the beaver will abandon your pond and move to your neighbor's pond. That is, there is a 12% chance that the beaver will do this, according to the over 600 page "pamphlet" on beavers published by the Cornell Cooperative Extension. The other 88% of the time, the beaver will actu-



ally completely overextend itself—it will stop sleeping, it won't eat, it will drown in the maddened, exhausted effort to stop the sound of flowing water.

"Let's just shoot it", we agreed.

We found the green canvas rifle bag and a box with a thousand rounds of brass-cased bullets in the tool shed. Down by the old barn, we propped a sheet of rotting plywood up against a fence post and spray painted a sausage-looking beaver on it. Then we walked about thirty feet down field from our target and unbuttoned the bag. The rifle was cold and heavy and it smelled like oil, all things you might expect from a rifle. Loading the bullet was easy, and racking the pump was something we'd done thousands of times in pantomime as boys "CHK-CHK!" We took turns squinting down the pipe or barrel or whatever you call it, aiming at that distant hot-dog. Shooting wasn't easy. Our first attempts shattered the two big barn windows six feet above the plywood: Collateral Damage.

Chris was the first to make it onto the board after ten shots or so, and I was the first to hit wiener-beaver. It was a body-shot and the pamphlet warned against aiming for the body with a low caliber single-shot weapon, because the skin of the animal is so tough that you are more likely to mortally wound the creature than to kill it, ensuring a slow and painful death. We needed to shoot it in the face. And after three hours of shooting, we could almost guarantee a head shot, because by this point we had closed ranks on the plywood and were firing on it from about five feet. We figured we'd be relying heavily on stealth anyway. We cleaned up the spent casings, had a smoke, and hid the bullet-riddled effigy in the tall grass, where the enemy would never find it.

The next step was to destroy the dam in order to clear the outflow and provoke him to come and repair it. We pulled and swung away at these heavily cemented and maniacally intertwined masses of branches with our bare hands, shovels, a pickaxe. The sun had started to set by the time we managed to get the water really flowing.

We had begun to realize that there wasn't anything noble about what we were doing, which is (of course) totally obvious. All we had were communication skills and an afternoon crash-course in mechanized brutality, and here we'd chosen to take the life of an animal who was clearly more disciplined and a far better builder than either of us. But the alternative seemed somehow worse, especially in this sober and morbid hour—we could have the trapper come and never have to really think about this; for two hundred dollars we could have a mild pinprick of guilt and the problem would be solved. No, we were going to make this confrontation happen, draw it into irrevocable conclusion and see for ourselves the mortal consequences of an abstract decision. We didn't need no outside help, we'd take care of ours, classic inbred logic. We went back inside to review the section on dressing beavers in the *Joy Of Cooking*.



Our plan was to take ten-minute shifts with the rifle, and whoever had the first clear shot would take it. The other would have the two flashlights to blind the beaver and make it possible to aim, and would also be responsible for carrying the 12" butcher knife in his waistband which would be wielded to finish off the animal if the shot wasn't true. We put on black rubber boots, dark clothing, and smeared our faces with burnt cork, rendering us completely invisible in the darkness as we trampled around in the muck, smoking. It was all very Elmer Fudd. Eventually, we perched on top of the rusted and cockeyed playground slide that jutted out into the shallows and waited.

The beaver saw us before we saw him. He sounded the alarm with his tail: "THWACK! THWACK! THWACK!" on the surface of the water. Chris clicked on the flashlights, and we could see him there, swimming rapidly back and forth in a widening ellipse. We were between him and the ruined dam, and he was testing the boundaries of safety. His coat looked sheer and slimy and his entire being was so much larger than I had imagined, particularly his head—low in the water, flat and as wide as a box of Klondike Bars. The light seemed to mesmerize the beaver, because he began to swim slower and draw toward us, eyes gleaming an inch or so above the water. I carefully loaded a bullet into the chamber and slid the pump in and out as quietly as I could. I raised the gun, sighted the beaver and aimed. I wasn't sure what to do. I traced his path with the rifle.

"Should I do it?" I whispered. The beaver was closer in the water; I could see his nostrils quivering. I waited for him to duck underwater, to sense the danger, but instead he just kept on floating in toward us. He turned slowly, his long brown flank and that lunchbox head in



perfect profile. My heart was bellowing with blood, and my eyes burned from the effort not to blink.

Chris yelped an affirmative “Geh!” through his clenched teeth. My shoulder tightened, and I curled my index finger in on the trigger. By way of eloquently weighing the gravity of the moment, I said “Uh, . . . sorry!” And then, unbelievably, I fired.

The rifle bucked back and I saw a flash of spinning movement as the beaver appeared to rotate backward in space, a blur of swirling fur and spray of water, as if it had found itself suddenly hoist on the spit of a tornado-speed rotisserie. An instant later and Chris was in the water, the flashlight beam discoing wildly around the pond, the woods, and the night fields as he stabbed away at the rippling murk. Then everything was still. We stood in the water, each peering at the surface of the water as the light was trained across the pond again and again, each pass illuminating a flat, turbid pane of milky green. No movement, no noise. No beaver.

We spent an hour looking in the weedy overgrowth along the perimeter of the pond before giving up. We both felt terrible. It looked like I had hit it, but where was it? Was it wounded, suffering unspeakably somewhere, floundering in the water? We went inside and drank some milk. We didn't say much; the elephant in the room was a bleeding beaver. It was heart-wrenching, sickening and also weirdly disappointing, because we had absolutely no idea what had happened out there. There hadn't been any conclusion. The beaver had just disappeared.

The next morning, I woke up before dawn and went out to look again. There was still mist on the pond. I walked its full circumference, waded through the shallows and didn't come up with anything but a couple leeches. I thought about swimming out to the lodge, thinking that I might try and swim under and see if anyone was home. But I decided to allow the poor beast its dignity, especially considering that whole German Shepard thing.

Almost a week went by. We went back to work on the dance floor, by now we were putting in longer days—five and six hours even—sort of in honor of the beaver. And then, one night about a week before the wedding, the beaver came back. He chewed down the old willow tree at the far end of the pond, and dammed up the outflow with a few birch saplings and plenty of mud. My Aunt Sue could only shake her head.

“You missed”, she said.

And so, Isaac got married and the beaver survived the summer. Up the road, the pond became balder, all the smaller trees were chomped down, and night after night the dam got thicker and more elaborate. The water rose and swamped a little of the far field, but Sue's house stayed on dry ground. The beaver never did anything with the old willow though, it just lay in the water

and drooped into decay, a sustained middle finger from him to us.

In January, Aunt Sue had the trapper come and kill the beaver. I had moved to New York in the fall, and was working for a crooked contractor who would eventually stiff me out of two months' pay, but for the time being I enjoyed the work: a lot of coffee breaks and lying about your whereabouts. Chris and I were having hot dogs when he told me the news: his mom had called him earlier that day and mentioned that it was all over, the beaver was gone. We talked about some other things, and walked downtown into the face of an ear-shearing wind. It had gotten late by the time we parted ways; he went down to take the C up to Washington Heights and I walked the cavernous and deserted blocks east to catch the J.

Plastic bags were doing their thing, tumbling around and freezing in lumps to the sidewalk; Burger King was just beaming away, screaming “Chicken Fries!” into the empty night. The beaver was dead. I held my hands over my ears and ran down the steps, rumbling with the approach of my way home.

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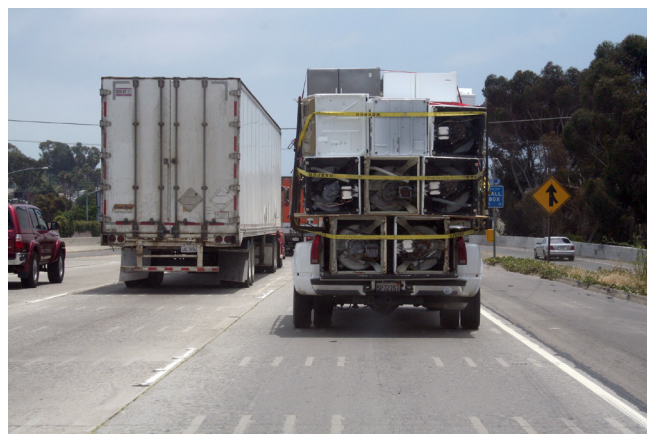
David Snyder lives and works in LA. He is currently in the MFA program at UCLA.

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Illustrations by David Snyder.

## Camionetas: Moving Monuments

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CAMILO ONTIVEROS



When I see these trucks driving down the 5 freeway, going south, I think about questions of migration, removal, and economy. Most of these appliances are removed from the streets of the greater Los Angeles area after having been disposed by their owners, either because they are not working properly or they are too old to be decorating the house. The appliances are then removed off the streets by groups of workers, mostly immigrants from Mexico and Central America, and transported south of the border where they regain a value and enter back into an economy. These photographs are a source of inspiration and research material for the concepts that I have been addressing in my work, such as removal, disappearance, migration, and alternative/informal economies related to migration.

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Camilo Ontiveros is a co-founder of Lui Velasquez, an art space in Tijuana as well as Imprenta, a new space for art and dialogue in the MacArthur Park area of Los Angeles. He lives and works in Los Angeles, and will receive his MFA from UCLA in 2009.



